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In 1990, award-winning news reporter Robin Garr left daily journalism to take on the challenge of seeking out the nation's most innovative grassroots organizations and the hometown heroes who are fixing what's broken on the streets where they live.



ROBIN GARR

Over the next few years, working with the non-profit organization World Hunger Year (WHY), he visited hundreds of outstanding groups in all 50 states, filling hundreds of notebooks with the stories of programs that work.

In his preface to Garr's 1995 book, *Reinvesting In America*, author and vice-presidential adviser David Osborne wrote, "Robin Garr did what so few policy experts in America ever do. He got out of the office and went into the communities where solutions are being crafted. He spent several years traveling across America, visiting successful community organizations that ran everything from homeless shelters to job training programs. ... For those who care about the poor -- as opposed to those who simply want political credit for reforming welfare -- *Reinvesting In America* is an important book. If we can figure out how government can empower the grassroots, bottom-up initiatives captured here, we can make a dent in poverty."

On this Website, @GRASS-ROOTS.ORG, Garr offers the Internet community a summary of the most inspiring stories that he found in his journey for *Reinvesting In America*. You'll find here the stories of scores of innovative grassroots programs run by local heroes who've found effective ways to build on the strengths of their communities to make them better.

Sadly, many of these fine organizations are no longer active, and in many cases contact information has changed. It is no longer practical for us to update information on this site, but we leave the original body of information online as a way of celebrating these innovative ideas and the outstanding people who put them to work in their communities.

Please join us and read some of our stories. We hope you'll be inspired by them, and then we hope you'll decide to roll up your sleeves and get involved in your own community, be it in the U.S. or anywhere on Earth.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Want to get involved? For some specific suggestions about how you can support our work, and more important, how you can support the work of outstanding grassroots organizations in your own community, read our feature, [You Can Help!](#)

- For a closer look at Garr's move from metropolitan journalism to the life of a traveling journalist covering grassroots innovation, [read the Preface](#) to his book and check out the Introduction, "[Give a Man a Fish](#)." Or if you'd like to turn to the back of the book first, have a look at his conclusions in its final chapter, "[Lessons for All Americans](#)."
- Further reading? We've set up an [Amazon.com bookstore](#) to showcase a number of other books about grassroots activism and issues that we've enjoyed and can wholeheartedly recommend.



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GROUPS THAT CHANGE COMMUNITIES

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Delancey Street Foundation

Delancey Street Foundation
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This well-known and widely praised program literally seems almost too good to be true. Visualize this: A full square block of stylish new stucco and tile buildings on San Francisco's busy Embarcadero, featuring nearly 200 pricey-looking townhouses, well-kept parks, a Town Hall, small businesses and a fancy restaurant with a maitre-d' standing proudly at the door -- staffed entirely by ex-convicts, former drug abusers and formerly homeless people, some 450 of these folks pulling themselves up by the bootstraps through an organization that they run themselves, led by an unpaid staff of exactly one: Co-founder and President/CEO Mimi Silbert.

Delancey Street's basic premise is very simple, explained Gerald Miller, a soft-spoken ex-con in a conservative dark suit, who's pulled himself up by his own bootstraps and now helps others do the same: "All you need to do to get in here is write and ask. We'll accept people from all over the U.S., but transportation is not paid."

The organization's 1,000 participants are three-fourths male and about equally divided among Anglo, black and Hispanic. About 60 percent come from the criminal-justice system as parolees, and about one-third have been homeless.

New arrivals make a two-year commitment (although the doors aren't locked, and participants may choose to leave at any time); most actually stay three or four years before moving on. Newcomers start at the bottom, living in dorm-like rooms with eight or nine roommates and taking on daily maintenance chores such as sweeping, mopping and caring for the facility's tidy parks.

Operating on an "each one teach one" basis, participants quickly move up the ladder, taking on more responsible jobs and quickly moving into positions where they oversee newer arrivals. First goal is the high-school equivalency certificate, quickly followed by hands-on experience in Delancey Street's training businesses, which include a high-tech print shop, a moving and trucking operation, paratransit services, an advertising-specialty operation involving the sale of college and institutional souvenirs, catering, and the restaurant. By the time participants are ready to leave, they've typically received the equivalent of a high-school diploma and thorough training in at least three job skills, and had plenty of

opportunity to supervise and work out their management talents.

Again, this is all done within Delancey Street's internal structure, managed by the residents themselves, with only three basic rules: No violence, no threats of violence, and no drugs or alcohol. Remarkably, Silbert says the organization's 23-year history is unmarred by violence.

Even without a staff, Miller said, it costs an average of \$10,000 per resident per year to run Delancey Street, an annual outlay amounting to \$4.5 million; that, and the \$30 million capital investment in the organization's 350,000-square-foot complex, completed in 1989, were all raised privately through private grants, community contributions, an annual Christmas-tree drive and in-kind services, with a great deal of the work done by the residents themselves. (Almost 300 people were trained in the building trades further demonstrating the effectiveness of training business for non-profits.)

Delancey Street has come a long way since Silbert and her partner, the late John Maher (himself an ex-felon and former drug addict) started an informal support operation for a handful of drug addicts in their San Francisco apartment. They've established satellite programs in Los Angeles, New Mexico, North Carolina and upstate New York. And most important, they've touched the lives of 10,000 people — people like Gerald Miller, who didn't have much hope but now have jobs and productive lives to look forward to.

All the feature stories on @GRASS-ROOTS.ORG's pages are reported and written by Robin Garr, a prize-winning journalist who has visited more than 500 innovative grassroots programs in all 50 states since 1990.

- Browse his book, *Reinvesting In America*, at Amazon.com.
- Send him E-mail.
- Back to the @GRASS-ROOTS.ORG Home Page

